

A Profile of Canadian Hard-of-Hearing Youth

Un portrait des jeunes malentendants canadiens

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Abstract

Few studies have been conducted of hard-of-hearing youth, largely because this disability group went unrecognized until a few years ago. In a national study undertaken by the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association, Canadian hard-of-hearing youth (ages 13 to 25 years) were surveyed regarding educational, career, access, social, psychological, and other issues of importance to their well-being and successful integration into society. The results of the study will be shared in terms of their social and cultural implications. The dilemma of hard-of-hearing youth viewing themselves as being the same as everyone else, and being perceived as such due to the invisible nature of their disability, yet growing up with different experiences because of hearing loss, will be explored.

Abrégé

Il existe peu d'études sur les jeunes malentendants, principalement parce qu'on a guère prêté attention à ce groupe jusqu'à tout récemment. Dans une enquête menée par l'Association canadienne des malentendants, 150 jeunes (de 13 à 25 ans) ont été interviewés au sujet des problèmes psychologiques et sociaux pertinents à leur bien-être et à leur intégration dans la société: éducation, carrière, accessibilité. Les résultats de l'enquête seront présentés et discutés en fonction de leurs implications sociales et culturelles. Nous discuterons aussi du dilemme des jeunes malentendants, qui se considèrent eux-mêmes et sont perçus par les autres comme semblables à tous les jeunes, à cause du caractère invisible de leur infirmité, mais néanmoins vivent leur jeunesse de façon bien différente.

Social policy and programs need to be based on the experiences of the affected people. In the case of young people, their voices are often not considered because they are not adults and are not often in a position to influence policy development and implementation. This is a serious issue, particularly when adults refer back to the experiences of their own youth when developing policies, since it is likely that intervening changes have radically altered the environment and hence the kinds of experiences young people have today.

National Youth Survey

In 1993 and 1994, the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association (CHHA), a non-profit self-help organization consisting primarily of hard-of-hearing people, obtained the views of hard-of-hearing youth by conducting a national survey. A questionnaire was developed by the writer in consultation with CHHA members. After it was field tested, it was distributed nationally through CHHA's magazine *Listen* and through contacts in each province. Because of this distribution method, replies were received from Fall 1993 to the end of 1994. In total, 290 replies were received from nine provinces.

Hard-of-hearing youth were the target audience for the survey. *Hard of hearing*, according to the definition developed by CHHA, refers to people who have a hearing loss and rely on aural means of communication. Their communication may be supplemented by assistive listening devices and captioning systems. Such people do not, however, use signing as their primary means of communication. For the purposes of this survey, to allow for a range of responses, *youth* was defined as being any person between 13 and 25 years of age.

Demographic Profile

The profile in Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents from nine provinces. Ontario has the highest proportion of responses (20%) followed by British Columbia (18%), then Saskatchewan and Newfoundland (both at 14%).

Table 1. Provincial Distribution of Respondents

Province	No. of respondents	%
Ontario	57	20
British Columbia	52	18
Saskatchewan	42	14
Newfoundland	41	14
Alberta	29	10
Quebec	29	10
Nova Scotia	22	8
New Brunswick	17	6
Manitoba	1	<1

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The gender of the respondents was fairly evenly divided, with 52% being female and 48% being male (see Table 2).

Table 2. Gender of Respondents

Gender	No. of respondents	%
Female	152	52
Male	136	48
No response	2	—

Hearing Profile

Seventy-four percent of respondents were born with a hearing loss or experienced one in their first three years. One person responded that he was not born with a hearing loss—it occurred before birth! Seventy percent identified their loss as a sensori-neural loss, 10% stated it was a conductive loss, and the remainder did not respond.

Degrees of hearing loss spanned all of the categories, from mild to moderate to severe to profound, as shown in Table 3. The majority wore one or two behind-the-ear hearing aids.

Table 3. Degree of Hearing Loss for Respondents

Province	No. of respondents	%
Low	5	2
Mild	30	10
Moderate	67	23
Severe	58	20
Profound	73	25
Combinations	22	7
Unknown or no response	35	12

English was the first language of most respondents. About 60% were in high school, 23% were in college or university, and about 10% were in grade school (see Table 4).

Table 4. Current Situation of Respondents

Gender	No. of respondents	%
Grade school	29	10
High school	172	59
Community college	40	14
University	27	9
Employed	9	3
No response	13	4

Survey Responses on Education

The educational profile for high school students¹ showed that most were in fully integrated classes. Almost half used personal FM systems²; 12% used an oral interpreter and 9% used sign-language interpreters. Almost 40% used tutoring services and 33% had notetaking services. Fifty-five percent had an itinerant teacher and 30% had service from a speech-language pathologist.

Table 5. Types of Support Used by High School Students

Support	No. of respondents	%
Itinerant teacher	137	55
Personal FM system	124	48
Tutor	99	39
Notetaker	82	33
Speech-language pathologist	73	30
Oral interpreter	29	12
Signing interpreter	23	9
Electronic notetaking	2	1

The profile for students in post-secondary educational institutions shows a marked difference, in that the itinerant teacher is not a support available in post-secondary settings; however, disability-service providers often provide support, as was informally indicated by some respondents but not asked as a survey question. Another significant difference between high school and post-secondary students was that 30% of high school students used the services of a speech-language pathologist while only 7% of post-secondary students did so.

As shown in Table 6, notetaking services are greatly utilized in post-secondary education, with 60% using this form of support; tutoring is the next, most-utilized service with a 45% rate of usage, following by FM systems at a 30% rate of usage.

Table 6. Types of Support Used by Post-Secondary School Students

Support	No. of respondents	%
Notetaker	47	60
Tutor	34	45
FM system	24	30
Signing interpreter	15	20
Oral interpreter	8	10
Itinerant teacher	6	8
Speech-language pathologist	5	7
Electronic notetaking	4	5

Tables 5 and 6 give a profile of the extent to which various supports were used. We have to determine whether this is because of student preferences, lack of resources, or lack of information about resources. Answers to another survey question show that this subject deserves closer scrutiny. Specifically, 100 respondents indicated that they would like to make use of an FM system in a public place, while only 20 people actually did so.

One strong similarity between secondary and post-secondary respondents is that over 90% in each group reported difficulties in school. Students' most prevalent comments concerned difficulty in hearing teachers. Students said teachers added to hearing difficulties when they faced away from students while speaking, such as when they faced the blackboard. Students experienced particular difficulty hearing new and substitute teachers, because they had to learn to speechread a new person and adjust their communication approaches. The issue of teachers refusing to wear an FM system was reported a few times.

Respondents also reported difficulties hearing classmates and staff. This was particularly difficult during group discussions, it was noted. Noisy situations such as cafeterias, auditoriums, and school grounds were also identified as difficult listening environments. Slide shows and films were identified as problems, as was hearing when a tape-recorder was being used. Students also mentioned that there was a lack of notetakers and captioned films in class.

Students resolved these matters by turning to itinerant teachers for assistance with proofreading and writing, asking classmates for assistance, reading more on their own, obtaining a notetaker, and having the teacher write more on the board.

Actions students took on their own included sitting at the front of the class, asking others to repeat themselves or speak louder, meeting with the teacher after class, informing substitute teachers about their hearing losses, and using FM systems. One example of a typical response is: "I paid attention to the teachers and if it was necessary I would tell them that I had hearing problems. They couldn't believe it because it seems to them that I didn't have one."

Another example of a typical response is: "I make a point of meeting with the teacher at the beginning of the school year to explain some things which they could do to make it easier for me."

Attitudes

In response to a question about attitudes in their elementary or secondary school, hard-of-hearing youth tended to rate instructors higher than they rated other students or staff. The attitude of instructors was rated very good by 47%, while other students were rated as very good by 30% (see Table 7). Thirteen percent rated other students' attitudes as poor; this

Table 7. Secondary Hard-of-Hearing Respondents' Ratings of Student, Instructor, and Staff Attitudes

Rating	No. of respondents	%
Students		
Very good	82	30
Good	154	57
Poor	35	13
Instructors		
Very good	129	47
Good	126	46
Poor	17	4
Other staff		
Very good	107	40
Good	148	55
Poor	16	6

was three times as many as those who gave a poor rating to the attitude of instructors. In contrast to younger students, post-secondary students did not differentiate instructors, other students, and staff on the basis of their attitudes (see Table 8).

Table 8. Post-Secondary Hard-of-Hearing Respondents' Ratings of Student, Instructor, and Staff Attitudes

Rating	No. of respondents	%
Students		
Very good	32	42
Good	37	48
Poor	8	10
Instructors		
Very good	31	40
Good	38	50
Poor	8	10
Other staff		
Very good	29	39
Good	40	53
Poor	6	8

Access

The survey asked young hard-of-hearing people about their experiences in everyday life. We found that approximately half of the respondents had difficulty watching television. Some solved this problem by sitting close to the television or using a television decoder. Two-thirds reported difficulties using the phone; 27% reported use of a Telephone Device for the Deaf (TTY or TDD) and a third reported use of the hearing aid T-switch on the phone. A slightly higher number (41%) used an amplifier on the phone. Half of the survey respondents indicated that financial support for technical devices was a problem, while half did not find this to be a

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difficulty. Most cited difficulties hearing in public places, small groups, and restaurants. Most (75%) relied on speech-reading.

Table 9. Respondents' Hearing Difficulties in Various Situations

Situation	No. of respondents		
	Yes	No	Sometimes
Watching TV	56	145	84
Using a telephone	90	92	104
Watching a movie/play	99	104	81
Talking in small groups	85	86	110
Dining in restaurant	69	108	103

Note. n=290.

Contacts

Eighty-three percent had seen an audiologist in the last year. A lower percentage had seen their family doctor or an itinerant teacher in the last year.

Contact	No. of times	%
Audiologist	242	83
Family doctor	229	79
Itinerant teacher	155	54
Hearing-aid dispenser	151	52
Ear specialist	113	38
Vocational counsellor	82	28
Speech-language pathologist	43	12
Self-help group	34	12

Table 10. Respondents' Solutions to Hearing Difficulties in Various Situations

Situation	No. of respondents			
	Yes	No	Sometimes	No response or N/A
Watching TV				
Decoder	114	167	8	8
Amplifier	10	262	7	11
Sit close to TV	70	148	67	5
Other ^a	100	—	—	—
Using a telephone				
TTY/TDD	64	199	15	12
T-switch	77	187	21	5
Telephone amplifier	98	161	23	8
Watching a movie/play				
Listening system	6	263	14	7
Talking in small groups				
Speechread	158	52	73	7
Listening system	43	205	24	18
Sign interpreter	30	237	14	9
Dining in restaurants				
Choose a quiet restaurant	67	154	58	11
FM system	2	274	2	12
Other ^b	82	—	—	—

Note. n=290.

^aSpecifically, 29 respondents increased the TV's volume; 41 asked other people to fill in information; 8 lipread; 2 used headphones; 3 watched TV in a quiet place; 7 used hearing aids; 3 used FM systems; and 7 used several solutions at once. ^bSpecifically, 11 respondents avoided noisy areas; 10 chose well-lit areas; 1 used an interpreter; 4 wrote notes; 9 relied on other people to help them; 9 lipread; 5 used effortful listening and careful speaking; 7 used the menu; 1 chose to sit at round tables; 17 used several solutions at once; and 8 used other solutions.

Identification

Respondents tended to tell instructors about their hearing loss, but to be less forthright with other students. Their reluctance may have resulted from perceived negative reactions by other students.

Most indicated an interest in attending workshops for people who are hard of hearing, as well as willingness to help others learn about how to deal with their hearing loss, about a third were uncertain about this.

Eighty-nine percent stated that their parents were understanding and supportive; only five and seven people, respectively, did not feel this way (see Table 13). Twenty-four people found other members of the family non-supportive and referred, in particular, to siblings.

Almost all stated that their parents encouraged them to obtain a high school education, but a few said their parents did not encourage a post-secondary education. Importantly, 20% felt their parents did not encourage a career without options being limited by considerations of the young person's hearing loss. Furthermore, 40% believed their parents overprotected them.

Table 12. Patterns of Informing Others of Hearing Loss

Group	Yes		Sometimes		No		No answer	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Classmates	155	54	77	27	47	16	11	4
Instructors	215	74	39	14	25	11	11	4
Professionals	191	66	46	16	36	12	17	6
Adults	140	48	95	33	43	15	12	4

Table 13. Interactions with Parents by Respondents

Parental interaction	Yes		No	
	No.	%	No.	%
Understood	253	89	5	2
Are supportive	259	89	7	2
Encourage high school education	268	97	8	3
Encourage post-secondary education	223	83	43	16
Encourage a career not limited by hearing loss	206	79	53	20
Overprotect	110	40	165	60

Issues

Respondents were asked to rate issues of priority on a scale of high, medium, and low. The issues that received the highest ratings were employment, education and training, human rights, and telephone services (see Table 14).

Table 14. Issues of High Priority to Respondents

Issue	No. of responses	%
Employment	201	69
Education and training	198	68
Human rights	179	62
Telephone services	172	59
Sports and recreation	155	53
Hearing loss prevention	140	48

Personal

A series of statements were offered and respondents were asked to check all of the statements that described them. Those statements which received the most responses are shown in Table 15.

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Table 15. Respondents' Agreement with Selected Statements

Statement	No. of responses	%
I have supportive parents/caregivers.	251	87
I have an understanding family.	242	83
I have someone I can turn to	242	83
I have friends.	198	68
I feel frustrated sometimes.	180	62
I am like everyone else.	165	57
I am outgoing.	154	53
I feel others understand.	152	52
I am not deterred by my hearing loss.	148	51
I miss out a little.	148	51
I have friends who are hard of hearing or deaf.	142	49
I am sometimes lonely.	127	44
I feel a lot is being done.	124	43

Positive and negative forms of each statement were offered; for example, "I feel frustrated" or "I feel frustrated sometimes." As shown in Table 16, most respondents selected the more positive of the statements. For example, "I miss out a little" received 65 responses compared to 62 responses for, "I miss out a lot." However the more negative form was selected by over 20% for more than seven statements; for example, "I have few friends," "Others do not understand," and "I am discouraged by my hearing loss." This suggests that things are not all well for a significant number of hard-of-hearing youth.

The level of hearing loss and use of hearing aids appear to have little influence on the selection of positive or negative statements. There was no pattern found between level of loss and use of hearing aids and the numbers who selected more positive or more negative statements. However, there appeared to be more of a selection of negative statements from those who also rated instructors and fellow students' attitudes to be poor.

Table 16. Respondents' Agreement with Selected Statements: More Negative Responses

Statement	No. of responses	%
I am different from everyone.	78	27
I am often lonely.	31	11
I have few friends.	61	21
I am shy.	67	23
Others do not understand.	60	21
I feel frustrated.	35	12
I miss out a lot.	62	21
Not enough is being done.	70	24
I am discouraged by my hearing loss.	75	26
I have no one to turn to.	13	5

Areas for Action

The results of the survey still require interpretation, but the following areas have been identified for policy and program development:

1. Hard-of-hearing youth at risk. It appears that some hard-of-hearing youth are at risk. Further study is required to determine how this issue should be addressed.
2. Awareness training for students. Students should receive awareness training to foster understanding and positive attitudes of hard-of-hearing people.
3. Peer notetaking program. A peer support program may increase notetaking and peer tutoring for high school students. This model has been found to work effectively at the post-secondary level.
4. Parent education. Most students stated that their parents were supportive and understanding; some, however, indicated that their parents were overprotective and tended to suggest choices limited by the young person's hearing loss. This suggests the need for parent support and education.
5. Hard-of-hearing youth networking. A considerable percentage of hard-of-hearing youth were interested in networking. Opportunities for increasing their interaction should be provided.

Summary and Conclusion

The results of this study provide a wealth of information to guide social policy and programs for young hard-of-hearing people. Most of the 290 respondents were born with a hearing loss and wear a hearing aid. Most hard-of-hearing youth are taking part in integrated classes; some, but not all, use a variety of support services.

Survey results suggest that a significant percentage are not coping well. Twenty percent of the respondents stated that they were discouraged and 20% also answered that they have few friends and that others do not understand. At the same time, it should be recognized that this is not the case for all hard-of-hearing youth. For example, one wrote, "I am coping just fine, thanks." Nevertheless, the survey indicates that we should look more closely at *why* so many respondents are "discouraged".

The survey also indicates that, despite coping for the most part, many hard-of-hearing youth are encountering difficulties. Two-thirds have difficulty using telephones, watching television, and hearing in small groups, restaurants, and public places. Ninety percent responded that they experience difficulties both in secondary and post-secondary institutions; in particular, they had problems hearing instructors and other students.

The survey found between a third to half of respondents using various types of support services in secondary and post-secondary schools. Notetaking is used more in post-secondary schools, while itinerant teacher support is the most common source of support for secondary school students. Forty-eight percent of students in the secondary school system use FM devices and 30% of post-secondary students use them. The use of FM devices in public places is limited, despite an indication that such use would be favoured by more hard-of-hearing youth.

Secondary school respondents tend to rate instructors' attitudes as "very good" more often than the attitudes of peers. Post-secondary respondents tend to rate the attitudes of instructors, students, and staff as being about the same. Hard-of-hearing students are more likely to tell instructors about their hearing loss and less likely to tell their peers. Perhaps their reluctance stems from their perceptions of peers' attitudes. The effect of not informing their peers, however, may be that their peers are less likely to understand the impact of hearing loss on the other student.

Parents are generally found to be understanding and supportive; at the same time, 20% of respondents feel their parents limit career aspirations based on the presence of the hearing loss, and 40% state that their parents are overprotective.

Employment, education and training, human rights, and telephone services are the top priorities of hard-of-hearing youth.

Awareness training for students, the establishment of peer notetaking programs in the secondary system, the development of parent education and support programs, and a hard-of-hearing networking program are some of the recommendations resulting from this study. In addition, it is recommended that further study be devoted to the issue of why certain young hard-of-hearing people may be at risk.

End notes

¹The section about high school situations was also completed by some grade school students. Because no separate box was provided for these students, their results were tabulated with the known high school students.

²The survey used the term "FM system" when the generic term of "assistive listening system" would have been more appropriate, given the increasing use of devices such as infrared listening systems.

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